Michael R. Gottfredson and

Travis Hirschi

AGENERAL THEORY OF

CRIVIE

A GENERAL THEORY OF

CRIME

Michael R. Gottfredson and

Travis Hirschi



Stanford University Press

Stanford, California

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California
© 1990 by the Board of Trustees of the
Leland Stanford Junior University
Printed in the United States of America

Original printing 1990

Last figure below indicates year of this printing: 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96 95 94

CIP data appear at the end of the book

Stanford University Press publications are distributed exclusively by Stanford University Press within the United States, Canada, and Mexico; they are distributed exclusively by Cambridge University Press throughout the rest of the world.

TO THE TAILGATERS OF '88

Karol, Kate, Bryan, Anna, Kendal, Karen, Nathan,
Janice, Justine, and Phil

Because he was concerned about children, one day his mind was illuminated. He thought, *Something can be done for them*.

To believe in something not yet proved and to underwrite it with our lives: it is the only way we can leave the future open. Man, surrounded by facts, permitting himself no surmise, no intuitive flash, no great hypothesis, no risk is in a locked cell. Ignorance cannot seal the mind and imagination more surely.

-Lillian Smith, The Journey (New York, 1954, pp. 12, 256)

Acknowledgments

John Hagan and John Kaplan read the manuscript of this book and offered valuable advice and encouragement. We are grateful for their efforts and hasten to add that they may not agree with all we have to say about crime.

Students and colleagues at the University of Arizona read and reacted to various versions of our manuscript, and they also offered valuable advice. They include Gary Jensen, David Rowe, Chester Britt, Lenore Simon, Jeffrey Klotz, Mary Ann Zager, Theron Quist, David Sorenson, Carolyn Uihlein, Linda Markowitz, and Barbara Costello.

Readers of the book will soon discover that we have intellectual debts we do not always take the time to recognize in the text. Far beyond acknowledgments that may be found in footnotes or references, we have been influenced by the work of Ronald Akers, Lee Robins, David Matza, Marcus Felson, Lawrence Cohen, Ronald Clarke, Jackson Toby, John Hagan, Donald Cressey, Yohji Morita, Gerald Patterson, John Laub, Robert Sampson, Ruth Kornhauser, Robert Burgess, Timothy Hope, Chuen-jim Sheu, Pat Mayhew, Ernest van den Haag, Gwynne Nettler, Daniel Glaser, David Bordua, Rodney Stark, Carl Klockars, Martin Killias, Kenneth Land, John Lofland, Irving Piliavin, LaMar Empey, and Walter Gove. We would not suggest that those listed would agree with what we have to say; we would suggest that we have tried to take seriously what they have had to say.

We would be remiss in our duty to friendship not to mention the daily stimulation we once enjoyed from our colleagues Michael Hindelang (at the University at Albany) and Maynard Erickson (at the University of Arizona).

At Stanford University Press, Grant Barnes reacted to our manuscript with the mix of enthusiasm and criticism that only lucky authors experience. We are grateful that he was willing to devote his talent and energy to our book. Julia Johnson Zafferano responded to our request for proactive editorial assistance with a zeal that would make users of such terms as "proactive" shudder. As a consequence, the book is now much better than it was.

Portions of some chapters are rewritten from materials published elsewhere. We are grateful to the publishers for allowing us to use those materials here. Specifically, we are grateful to the University of Chicago Press for "Age and the Explanation of Crime" (American Journal of Sociology 89: 552-84); to the American Society of Criminology for "The True Value of Lambda Would Appear to Be Zero" (1986, 24: 213-34), "The Methodological Adequacy of Longitudinal Research on Crime" (1987, 25: 581-614), "Science, Public Policy, and the Career Paradigm" (1988, 26: 37-55), and "Causes of White Collar Crime" (1987, 25: 949-74); to ICS Press for "Crime and the Family" (pp. 53-68 in James Q. Wilson, ed., Crime and Public Policy, 1983); to Transaction Publishers for "The Distinction Between Crime and Criminality" (pp. 55-69 in T. F. Hartnagel and R. Silverman, eds., Critique and Explanation: Essays in Honor of Gwynne Nettler, 1986) and "A Propensity-Event Theory of Crime" (pp. 57-67 in F. Adler and W. Laufer, eds., Advances in Criminological Theory, Vol. 1, 1988); to the Cultural and Social Centre for the Asian and Pacific Region for "A General Theory of Crime for Cross-National Criminology" (pp. 44-53 in Proceedings of the Fifth Asian-Pacific Conference on Juvenile Delinquency, 1988); and, finally, to Sage Publications for "Career Criminals and Selective Incapacitation" (pp. 199-209 in J. E. Scott and T. Hirschi, eds., Controversial Issues in Crime and Justice, 1988). M.R.G.

T.H.

Preface

We have for some time been unhappy with the ability of academic criminology to provide believable explanations of criminal behavior. One after another, the disciplines have staked a claim to crime, and each has ended up saying about crime what it says about nearly everything else. No explanation consistent with a disciplinary perspective seems to have the ring of truth. Public policies have pretty much exhausted the possibilities available to those who would use the criminal justice system to combat crime, moving from rehabilitation, through deterrence, to incapacitation. Policymakers ask in vain for ideas to justify pursuing one solution rather than another, and as a result they are at the mercy of whatever proposals come along, from more police to fewer drugs, from more career-criminal programs to fewer furloughs, from sting operations to neighborhood watch.

We have also been unhappy with the "interdisciplinary" solution to this state of affairs. Within the university, criminology has always been the prototypical *sub* discipline, a derivative field of study hoping to achieve truth and status by accepting the insights of its parent disciplines. In fact, criminology shows that interdisciplinary attention is the road to theoretical and practical obscurity.

We find this situation paradoxical. Few topics seem more important than the bases of social and political order, more interesting than the question of human nature, or more practical than the understanding of theft and violence. Students seem to agree. Few courses attract more students to the classroom. Why should those interested in crime grant ownership of the area to one or another of the basically uninterested disciplines?

We have tried to write a book that is free of the constraints of disciplinary perspectives but that is useful in tracing the outlines of reasonable public policy toward crime. We have also tried to write a book consistent with the results of competent research, whatever the discipline producing it and whatever it may say about the limits of our ability to control crime.

To write such a book, we have looked again at the view of crime that prevailed before the disciplines came into being, the view that saw crime as the natural consequence of unrestrained human tendencies to seek pleasure and avoid pain. This view, known within criminology as the classical tradition and outside of criminology as the rational-choice model, was abandoned by criminologists long ago in favor of the view of science embodied in the disciplines. This disciplinary view of science, referred to as positivism, has dominated criminology throughout the twentieth century. It emphasizes causation and determinism, and it denies the self-seeking model of human nature embodied in the classical school.

Upon inspection, we found that we could not simply resurrect the classical model as a solution to the theoretical and policy problems of criminology. With all its difficulties, modern positivism has assembled many facts that do not combine easily with an unqualified interpretation of classical theory. For example, although classical theory tends to lead to concern with the legal costs of crime, much research shows that the operations of the criminal justice system are of little consequence for the crime rate. Classical theory also tends to ignore the role of the family in crime causation, a stance unjustified by research.

At the same time, the classical image of human nature and the classical conception of the criminal act seemed to us better able than any positivistic theory to accommodate the finding that crime is only part of a much larger set of deviant acts, acts that include accidents, victimizations, truancies from home, school, and work, substance abuse, family problems, and disease. It is also known that crime is heavily concentrated among the young, and that differences between people in their propensity to crime are reasonably stable over long periods.

The disciplines routinely begin by asking "What causes crime?" Not surprisingly, each discipline answers the question by pointing to its own central concepts. Thus sociology looks to social class, culture, and organization; psychology looks to personality; biology looks to inheritance; and economics looks to employment or work. We begin in Chapters 1 and 2 with a different question: "What is crime?" Unlike

nearly all previous work, we thus begin with crime itself, exploring its essential nature before attempting to explain it. This turns out to be a profitable strategy. Social scientific and popular conceptions of crime are misleading. Crime does not require deprivation, peer influence, or the gang; it says little about one's biological past and is in no way akin to work. It requires no planning or skill, and "careers" in crime go nowhere but down. Nearly all crimes are mundane, simple, trivial, easy acts aimed at satisfying desires of the moment, as are many other acts of little concern to the criminal law. This helps us understand why so many social problems and forms of deviant behavior are concentrated in the same individuals. Crime in fact bears little resemblance to the explanations offered by the disciplines or to explanations popular in the media and in law enforcement propaganda.

For this reason, the task of putting classical and positive criminology together turned out to be more difficult than we had anticipated. The harder we looked at the empirical claims of the disciplines, the less certain we were of their validity. Chapters 3 and 4 recount our assessment of the truth of disciplinary claims about crime, from the currently popular idea that crime is to some extent passed on through the genes to the older but more settled idea that crime may be explained by a psychological trait called aggression. These chapters also examine the economic view of crime as work and the sociological conceptions of crime as normal learned behavior or as the expression of frustrated aspirations. In all cases, we conclude that such concepts are contrary to the nature of crime and, interestingly enough, to the data produced by the disciplines themselves. We conclude that these explanations survive more from their value to the disciplines than from their value as explanations of criminal behavior.

In Chapter 5, we derive a conception of the criminal consistent with the nature of crime. This offender is neither the diabolical genius often portrayed by the police and the media nor the ambitious seeker of the American dream often portrayed by the positivists. On the contrary, the offender appears to have little control over his or her own desires. When such desires conflict with long-term interests, those lacking self-control opt for the desires of the moment, whereas those with greater self-control are governed by the restraints imposed by the consequences of acts displeasing to family, friends, and the law. Chapter 5 explores the nature and sources of such self-control, locating it largely in family child-rearing practices and using it as the basis of a general theory of crime.

In Chapters 6–10, we apply our theory and the facts revealed by our critical examination of the literature to the persistent problems of

criminology. Why are men, adolescents, and minorities more likely than their counterparts to commit criminal acts? What is the role of the school in the causation of delinquency? To what extent could crime be reduced by providing meaningful work? To what extent are children drawn into delinquency by their friends? Why do some societies have crime rates that are only a fraction of the crime rates of others? Does white-collar crime require its own theory? Is there such a thing as organized crime? In all cases, our theory provides answers that conflict with the conventional wisdom of academicians and criminal justice practitioners.

The last two chapters explore the implications of our theory for the study and control of crime. Contemporary criminology offers confused advice about how crime should be studied and about what policies might be adopted to reduce the crime rate. Here, too, our conclusions are at odds with prevailing views within and outside academia. We see little hope for important reductions in crime through modification of the criminal justice system. We see considerable hope in policies that would reduce the role of the state and return responsibility for crime control to ordinary citizens.

Contents

Preface	XIII
PART I. CRIME	
 Classical Theory and the Idea of Crime The Nature of Crime 	3 15
PART II. CRIMINALITY	
3. Biological Positivism4. Psychological, Economic, and Sociological	47
Positivism 5. The Nature of Criminality: Low Self-Control	64 85
PART III. APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY	
Criminal Events and Individual Propensities: Age, Gender, and Race	123
7. The Social Consequences of Low Self-Control8. Culture and Crime	154 169
9. White-Collar Crime	180
10. Organization and Crime	202
PART IV. RESEARCH AND POLICY	
11. Research Design and Measurement12. Implications for Public Policy	217 255
References Cited Index	277 293

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Percentage of Adopted Sons Who Are	
Registered Criminals, by Background of Biological and	
Adoptive Fathers	54
Table 2. Percentage of Adopted Sons Who Have Been	74
Convicted of Criminal Law Offenses, by Background of	
Biological and Adoptive Parents	55
Table 3. The Joint Effects of Biological Parents' and Adoptive	
Parents' Criminality on the Criminality of Adopted Sons,	
Denmark Other Than Copenhagen, 1924-47	56
Table 4. Cross-Fostering Data in a Swedish Study of Male	
Adoptees: Percentage Committing "Petty Crimes" by	
Biological Predisposition	58
Table 5. Male-to-Female Sex Ratios for Commonly Used	
Self-Report Items, Ranked by Magnitude of Median	
Sex Ratio	146
Table 6. Self-Reported Delinquency by Parental Supervision	
and Gender (in percent)	149
Table 7. Measures of Incidence (I), Participation (P), and	
Frequency (λ) by Type of Offense and Source of Data,	
Males Aged 13–18	243
Table 8. Correlations (Pearson's r and gamma) Between	
Outside Variables and Incidence (I), Participation (P), and	
Fraguency (1) Messures of Crime	246

Figure 1. Correlations Necessary to Produce an Observed	
Correlation of .03 Between the Criminal Behavior of	
Fathers and Sons	60
Figure 2. Age and Sex Distribution of Criminal Offenders in	
England and Wales, 1842–44	125
Figure 3. Age Distribution of Male Criminals at First	-
Conviction as a Percentage of the Age Distribution in the	
General Population, England, 1908	125
Figure 4. Age Distribution of People Arrested for all	_
Offenses, Standardized for Their Representation in the	
General Population, United States, 1977	125
Figure 5. Age Distribution of Males and Females Found	•
Guilty of Indictable Offenses, Standardized for Their	
Representation in the General Population, England and	
Wales, 1965	126
Figure 6. Delinquency Rates of Males Born in 1945 in	
Philadelphia, by Race and Age	127
Figure 7. Prison Infractions per 1,000 Male Inmates, New	
York State, 1975	129
Figure 8. Motor Vehicle Accidents by Age and Sex, New	
York State, 1977	130
Figure 9. True Theory Unaffected by Age	132
Figure 10. Fraud (1980 per 10,000) and Embezzlement	
(1984 per 1,000,000)	193
Figure 11. Arrest Rates by Sex and Race for Embezzlement	
(1981 per 1,000,000) and Fraud (1981 per 10,000)	193
Figure 12. Arrest Rates by Age for Murder (1983 per	
500,000), Fraud (1980 per 30,000), and Embezzlement	
(1984 per 1,000,000)	194
Figure 13. Embezzlement Rates (1984 per 100,000	
White-Collar Workers) by Sex	194
Figure 14. Arrest Rates by Age of Males for Robbery	
(per 100,000), United States, 1970, 1974, and 1983	263

I CRIME



Classical Theory and the Idea of Crime

Criminologists often complain that they do not control their own dependent variable, that the definition of crime is decided by political-legal acts rather than by scientific procedures. The state, not the scientist, determines the nature or definition of crime. After registering this complaint, the modern criminologist proceeds to define crime as "behavior in violation of law" and to study the phenomenon as defined by others. This book breaks with this tradition of passive compliance and attempts to construct a definition of crime consistent with the phenomenon itself and with the best available theory of criminal behavior. In doing so, it grants the basic thrust of the classical and of the positivist traditions, where the former focuses on the criminal act, or crime, and the latter on the properties of the actor, or criminal (see Matza 1964; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1987a: ch. 1).

The classical tradition began with a general theory of human behavior, then quickly narrowed its attention to government crime-control policy. In restricting its attention to "crime," this tradition eventually ignored many forms of behavior analogous to crime in terms of social reaction and identical to crime in terms of causation. The positivist tradition began with a general method of research, but without a theory of behavior that would define its dependent variable, it initially accepted the classical focus on crime. As positivism evolved, it eventually encompassed, under the term "deviance," the many forms of behavior left behind by the classical tradition. Lacking the classical theory of behavior, however, positivists have not been able to deal with the connections among the many acts that make up

4

deviance and crime. Consequently, they have tended to develop behavior-specific theories and to treat the relations between deviance and crime as cause and effect rather than as manifestations of a single cause. One purpose of this book is to reunite deviance and crime under a general theory of behavior.

To do so, it is necessary to reinterpret the classical tradition and emphasize its explanatory power. This chapter and the next attempt such a reinterpretation. As will be clear, we disavow the current construction of the classical view, especially the construction prevalent in economics that would limit this tradition to concern about government-defined and -sanctioned behavior. In the theory that emerges, we also disavow the contemporary division between the classical and positivist traditions. We suggest that a properly conceptualized classical view is fully consistent with the assumptions of modern positivism and with the facts produced by research.

A Modern Version of the Classical Conception of Crime

Force and fraud are ever-present possibilities in human affairs. Denial of this fact promotes the development of theories of crime that are misleading as guides to policy. Awareness of this fact allows the development of a theory of crime consistent with research and the needs of sound public policy. It has implications for how crime itself is construed, how it should be measured, the kind of people who are likely to engage in it, the institutional context within which it is controlled, and the most useful ways of studying it. One purpose of this book is to promote this view of crime.

People vary in their propensity to use force and fraud (criminality). This fact has implications for the way crime is measured, for the kinds of crimes that occur, for understanding the relation between crimes and social problems such as accidents and disease, for the proper design of research, and for the creation of useful public policies. Another purpose of this book is to promote explicit consideration of the propensity to crime as distinct from the commission of criminal acts.

These ideas about crime and criminality have been around a long time, surfacing again and again in academic criminology. Today, however, they are contrary to the views dominant in the field, where "crime" is seen as aberrant behavior and "criminality" as a distasteful relic of earlier modes of thought. In our view, the reason these views of crime and criminality come and go is that they have never been fully and systematically developed and defended. As the first step in